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THE SIMPLIFICATION OF FRENCH ORTHOGRAPHY. II.

II. THE DECISIONS OF THE FRENCH ACADEMY.¹

What strikes one most is the deliberately negative attitude towards the conclusions reached by the "Commission."

The "Commission" was in favor of matching, as much as circumstances will allow, pronunciation to orthography. But the Academy "repousse le principe même sur lequel s'appuie et d'où est comme partie la commission . . . rapprocher le plus possible . . . la parole écrite de la parole parlée."²

The "Commission," although—or better because—composed of great scholars, is ready to give up the etymological principle as being of no particular value for spelling. The Academy, on the contrary, "se confesse très attachée à l'orthographe étymologique."

The "Commission" thinks that the much talked about "physionomie des mots" is a myth.³ The Academy wishes to keep the idea that each word has its "individualité" and, as the poet says, is "un être vivant."

Besides, the French Academy adds a few reasons of its own to justify rigid conservatism, reasons which are either bad or childish. *E. g.*,

¹The committee elected by the Academy to consider the "Rapport de la Commission" was composed as follows: G. Boissier, Fr. Coppée, A. Mézières, F. Brunetière, J. M. de Hérédia, A. Theuriet, E. Ollivier, M. de Vogüé, E. Lavis, H. Houssaye, G. Hanotaux and E. Faguet.

²A sensible theory, indeed! Why have we a "parole écrite" anyway, if not to represent as faithfully as possible the "parole parlée"?

³It is really a myth, even as regards poetry. We read all French classics in modern orthography, and yet we are not disturbed in the least; but we are when we take the original. M. Renard has recently recalled the fact that Brunetière, the almost violent champion of the "physionomie des mots," has edited Bossuet in modern orthography—a proof that the argument was invented for the special purpose of defeating reform. M. Havet remarks that V. Hugo's first verses were published by their author in three different orthographies, first according to the spelling of the beginning of the nineteenth century, then with the changes brought to the dictionary of the Academy in 1835, then again in 1878.

1, 4: "L'Académie croit que la raison la plus forte qui s'oppose à l'adoption des réformes proposées est encore le bouleversement qu'elles apporteraient dans toutes les habitudes des Français . . ."⁴

Or this, that it would hamper the work of French writers: "Il est incontestable, au moins, qu'un changement profond dans l'orthographe embarrasserait les écrivains et leur serait une peine en quelque sorte matérielle qui pourrait aller jusqu'à les paralyser dans leurs travaux . . ." [!!!]

Or again, reforms now would be likely to open the door for further reforms, which by all means must be avoided.⁵

Of course it would. This is exactly the question whether it is not wise to enter resolutely the path of reform. And the Academy lacks consistency, both in theory and in practice, when after this it accepts some reforms, as we will see soon. Why, if they hold such theories, why not at least stand by them and try to enforce them? Simply because they do not care to be looked upon as the enemies of progress; in other words, because they are afraid of public opinion.

The bulk of their report is made out of thirty-two "*L'Académie repousse . . .*" or "*L'Académie rejette . . .*," and fourteen "*L'Académie accepte . . .*" Here are the fourteen paragraphs of acceptance:

1° *Déjà* (pour *déjà*).

2° *Chute* (pour *chûte*), *joute* (pour *joûte*), *otage* (pour *ôtage*), modifications que l'Académie a déjà fait entrer dans son dictionnaire; et de plus *assidument* (pour *assidûment*), *dévouement* (pour

⁴M. Havet answers very well: "J'admire l'égoïsme de tant de mes concitoyens qui se hâtent de décider au nom de leur vague agacement d'une minute, et qui, sans remords, se dispensent de peser les deux intérêts séculaires de l'avenir, j'entends l'intérêt humain et l'intérêt français." (*Revue Bleue*, 11 mars, 1905.)

⁵As an example of such miserable arguments in the part of the Report containing the examination of the work of the "Commission," read this (II, 8): "Elle [l'Académie] a rejeté la proposition d'écrire *fame* pour *femme*. Elle croit qu'il n'est pas mauvais de conserver un souvenir de l'étymologie, et aussi que si le mot *fame* (réputation) n'existe plus, le mot *fameux* existe, qui semblerait être l'adjectif du substantif *fame* et paraîtrait dès lors signifier *féminin*; et l'on pourrait en dire autant du mot *famélique*." As Clédat says, this "mérite d'être enchassé."

dévolement ou dévouement), *crucifiment* (pour *crucifiement* ou *crucifiment*).

3° *Ile* (pour *île*), *flute* (pour *flûte*), *maître* (pour *maître*), *naître* (pour *naître*), *traître* (pour *traître*), *croute* (pour *croûte*), *voute* (pour *voûte*) et autres mots où l'accent circonflexe ne sert qu'à rappeler l's étymologique.

4° Elle admet que l'on écrive *confidentiel* ou *confidenciel* et les adjectifs analogues, c'est à dire ceux dont le substantif est en *ence* ou en *ance*.

5° Elle accepte l'identification orthographique de *différent* et *différend*, de *fond* et *fonds*, de *appats* et *appas*, en ce sens que l'on écrirait : "Un *différent* s'est élevé; un *fond* de terre; la retraite a pour vous des *appats*."

6° Elle accepte qu'on écrive, *ad libitum*, *emmitoufler* et *emmitoufler*, *emmener* et *emmener*, *emmailloter* et *emmailloter*, et autres mots analogues où l'*n*, rencontrant *m*, est devenue *m*.

7° Elle accepte *ognon* pour *oignon*.

8° Elle ne voit aucun inconvénient à ce que l'on écrive *piéd* ou *pié*.

9° Elle accepte que les sept substantifs en *ou* qui prennent un *x* au pluriel : *bijou*, *caillou*, *chou*, *genou*, *hibou*, *joujou*, *pou*, rentrent dans la règle générale et prennent un *s* au pluriel.

10° Elle accepte *échèle* au lieu de *échelle*, conformément à la prononciation et à l'étymologie.

11° Elle a décidé de régulariser l'orthographe des mots venant de *carrus* en écrivant *charriot* par deux *r*, comme s'écrivent tous les autres mots dérivés de *carrus*.

12° Elle est disposée, en examinant chaque cas, à ne pas s'opposer à la suppression de l'*h* dans les mots, dérivés du grec, où se rencontre la combinaison *rh*.

13° De même, notamment, pour les mots de création scientifique, elle aura pour tendance de favoriser l'*i* plutôt que l'*y*.

14° Elle est favorable à la proposition d'écrire *sizain* comme on écrit *dizain* et *dizaine*; elle estime que l'on pourrait étendre cette réforme à *dizième* et *sizième* (au lieu de *dixième* et *sixième*) par conformité avec *onzième* et *douzième*.

Everywhere the reluctance of the Academy to yield is apparent. And yet they seem to be extremely anxious to look very generous; they write as if everybody was to be a dupe of their solemn academic style. There are fourteen points where

reform is accepted, but not one of them really amounts to anything.

See No. 1: The "Commission" proposed to do away with all the grave accents over *a*; the Academy gravely makes a paragraph of acceptance for one whole word: *déjà*.

See No. 2: Out of the six words which they propose to change, three were spelled this way long ago; but apparently it swells the list of concessions.

No. 9: The "Commission" proposed that all the plurals in *x* be from now on in *s*. The Academy reforms the six in *ou* only.

Then again, Nos. 7, 10 and 11 . . .

There is in the whole way of proceeding a painful lack of dignity. The Academy behaves like a nervous woman who will make a tremendous fuss about a trifle, while ignoring the really momentous question. Paul Meyer, among many others, pointed out those inconsistencies "que si oignon devient ongon, moignon doit logiquement devenir mognon: en limitant la réforme au seul oignon, on ne fait que créer une exception nouvelle!—que si échelle devient échèle, conformément au latin *scala*, où il n'y a qu'un *l*, il n'y a pas de raison de continuer à écrire quelle, telle, puisqu'il n'y a qu'un *l* dans *qualis* et *talis*."

It is difficult, even for antagonists of the reform, not to feel like M. Clédât, who begins his pamphlet with these words: "L'Académie vient de faire magistralement la démonstration de son incurable incompétence en matière de grammaire et d'orthographe." The word "incurable" may possibly be omitted; but it is the only one.

III. THE ARTICLE OF FAGUET.

Faguet had been selected by the committee of the French Academy to act as secretary. But he is an independent thinker and the ultra-conservative attitude of the Academy did not altogether please him. He did not want the public to believe that the report composed by him represented his personal opinion. Therefore, he accepted to give his own ideas, at first in the *Gaulois* of Febr. 18, and then with more details in *La Revue* of March 1, 1905. The argumentation in the latter was so completely different from that of his official writing that it has become the opinion of many that

Faguet had really mystified both the public and the Academy, and that his official report from alpha to omega was nothing but a daring joke. The writer feels very much inclined to share this view. Faguet begins, it is true, by approving the Academy in refusing to consider the principle of phonetic spelling—because, he says, the pronunciation is not fixed and it is a fixed orthography which is wanted. Moreover, he considers the concessions of the Academy—he calls them “concessions”—as “non sans quelque importance.” The chief part of his article remains none the less devoted to the refutation of the academic report, which he had himself drawn. Let us pick out three of the most striking passages :

As an Academician secretary, he opposes the simplification of certain words on the ground that confusion would arise between such terms different in meaning but spelt alike. “Elle [l’Académie] a rejeté *cors* (pour *corps*), *ni* (pour *nid*), *las* (pour *lacs*), *doit* (pour *doigt*) . . . , considérant qu’il n’y a pas d’exemples qui fussent mieux choisis pour montrer la difficulté et les périls d’un système de simplification qui aboutirait à une foule de confusions, c. à. d. au contraire même de la simplification véritable, et qui ferait qu’on devrait écrire “son *doit doit* être coupé,” “il *vint vint* fois,” “*ni ni ni* fleurs,” etc. And a few lines above : “Elle a rejeté la proposition d’écrire *fan, pan, tan* (pour *faon, paon, taon*). Il y aurait amphibologie . . . entre *pan* (animal) et *pan* (terme de polythéisme) et *pan* (morceau) et *pan* onomatopée exclamative . . . ”

Faguet answers, laughing at his own words : “L’auteur du rapport de la Commission académique triomphe de ce que si *paon* s’écrivait *pan*, il y aurait une confusion entre *pan* oiseau, *pan* de mur, *pan* personnage mythologique, et *pan* ! onomatopée. Mais mon ami (il m’est permis de le traiter familièrement) c’est précisément par ce qu’il y a déjà trois *pan* entre lesquels on ne fait aucune confusion qu’il n’y en aura pas davantage entre quatre *pan* ayant quatre sens . . . ”

Faguet, the secretary, writes with regard to etymology : “L’Académie française se déclare très attachée à l’orthographe étymologique . . . Le moment est-il bien choisi pour travailler à effacer le souvenir des origines de notre langue ? Non, sans doute, car cette parenté de notre langue avec la langue latine . . . fait plus facilement com-

prendre notre langue aux gens bien élevés de tous les pays.” To which Faguet, as a private man, answers : “Sainte Beuve a répondu d’avance assez à propos . . . : Cette raison qu’il faut garder aux mots tout leur appareil afin de maintenir leur étymologie est parfaitement vaine ; car pour une lettre de plus ou de moins, les ignorants ne sauront pas mieux reconnaître l’origine du mot, et les hommes instruits la reconnaîtront toujours.”

Faguet, the Academician, borrows Brunetière’s often quoted words in order to preserve the “physionomie des mots.” “Ceux qui considèrent une langue comme une œuvre d’art continueront de croire que dans une langue élaborée par cinq ou six siècles de culture esthétique, le mot a sa valeur en soi, qu’il a son “individualité,” qu’il est selon l’expression du poète “un être vivant” ; qu’on le mutile donc en simplifiant l’orthographe . . . que la *scintillation* des étoiles s’éteindrait, si l’on écrivait désormais *cintilation* . . . ” Now, here is what Faguet, the independent thinker, has to say : “Quant à la “physionomie des mots” elle m’est absolument indifférente. C’est l’argument à la portée des simples, des très simples, et c’est pour cela qu’il est celui dont les journalistes ont abusé et presque le seul dont ils se soient servis . . . Seulement la physionomie des mots a changé dix fois depuis trois cents ans et si l’on s’était arrêté à la physionomie des mots on écrirait encore *cholère* et *charactère* et *chymie* et *avocat* et *escole* et *abyssme* et *argille* et *bienfaicteur* et *déthroner*. La vérité est qu’on s’habitue très vite à la physionomie des mots. Qui est-ce qui regrette *françois*. Il n’est écrit *français* officiellement que depuis soixante-dix ans. Qui est-ce qui regrette *phthysie* et *rhythme* ? Ils ne sont écrit plus simplement que depuis vingt-cinq ans . . . Tenez, je me rappelle *hermite*. Il n’avait pas le sens commun ; car *h* indique un esprit rude” dans le mot grec et il n’y a pas le moindre esprit rude dans le mot grec. Mais quand il s’est agi de l’écrire normalement et simplement à la fois *ermite* il y eut soulèvement. Il y eut des gens pour dire, non sans esprit du reste (je ne me rappelle plus qui, mais mon père me l’a souvent raconté). “Oh ! la physionomie des mots ! On le voit, cet *hermite* portant devant lui son long bâton et s’appuyant sur lui . . . ”—“Pas mal ! Seulement ç’a n’a pas le sens commun.”

Faguet thinks that, in fact, any kind of orthog-

raphy will require five or six years of study for children and that the best reform will not save more than three or four weeks. He sees two chief difficulties which can be remedied easily in French spelling: the Greek words and the double consonants. He concludes his discussion: "Je propose donc la francisation de tous les mots grecs et la suppression de toutes les lettres doubles (sauf les quelques cas où il me serait démontré qu'une suppression de lettre double crée une véritable et dangereuse confusion entre deux mots, ce qui me sera démontré bien rarement."

(This is also the opinion of O. Gréard, and was accepted by many people, amongst others by the powerful "Ligue française de l'enseignement," headed by its president, F. Buisson.)

The decisions of the French Academy raised a general outcry, especially on the part of the scholars. P. Meyer, Brunot, Clédât and others have spoken very serious words. The "beau-rôle" does not remain with the Academy.

The most embarrassed person in France, in the meanwhile, was the Minister of Public Instruction. He was urged to simply ignore the opposition of the Academy. This, however, was not possible, his predecessor having himself asked for the advice of the celebrated body. All that remained for him to do was to create once more a "Commission" to adjust the differences and make out a list of the simplifications that ought to be made in taking into account both the report of the first Commission and that of the Academy. M. Bienvenu Martin, the following Minister, was then to act on their recommendations. At least it seems so from the words spoken by him at a meeting of the "Conseil Supérieur d'instruction publique" last fall. This will be, he says, "moins une commission d'étude qu'une commission de coördination et de proposition ayant pour mission spéciale de préparer les solutions définitives sur lesquelles le conseil aura à se prononcer dans sa prochaine session."

The members are: Messrs. Brunot, Clairin, Croiset, Faguet, Gasquet, Hémon, Paul Meyer, Rabier.

We wish to add two remarks.

The first is with regard to the position of the

Academy in the debates. What must—or rather what can be—their attitude? Few people seem to realize it, and generally err both in praise or in condemnation. It is an awkward position, and the Academy is only in part responsible for it. At the beginning, in the seventeenth century, it was decided that the select assembly would simply *constater l'usage*, but never *dictate* or *impose*. Over and over again, to the present day, the Academy has publicly declared that it would remain true to this principle. From an abstract point of view, this is well and good. But practically it proves infeasible. The function of *constater l'usage* carried with it a much greater influence for the Academy than was consistent with the original policy; and the Academy, even if it had tried to prevent it, could not help it if the public chose to consider its *constatations* as "orders." Ultimately it came to this, that now the public regulates itself on the Academy, instead of the Academy regulating itself upon the public. Innovations are bound to become very great exceptions; the Academy would not make them because it is not within its attributions, and the public would not, because the standard language is that of the Academy. Since education has become compulsory and the necessity of uniformity in spelling has grown still more important, there is no hope left. Now, as said above, the Academy is not responsible for the fact that the public accepts its decisions as absolutely authoritative, but the Academy is certainly responsible for accepting this situation and doing nothing to remedy it. On the contrary, they seem perfectly satisfied to act the part of tyrants at the expense of the language. It is perfectly right that the people be not asked to propose reforms; but, the Academy should make it a point to consult experts, to invite their coöperation so as to prevent French from getting to the state of a dead language. Exactly the contrary is done. And not only is there no example of the Academy ever asking such coöperation, but when, on the request of the Minister of Public Instruction, those scholars readily tender their excellent services, the Academy assumes an offended air, thanks them for their "good intentions" and pretends to make concessions which really amount to nothing.

Our second remark is of an even more general character. Concerning the reform itself, the con-

clusion which imposes itself after reading the "Rapport" Meyer is that, in order to do things right, now, after several centuries of a poor understanding of the needs of the language, would mean a very, very thorough reform—no less than the reform of the alphabet would really do. This, of course, makes one pause and think. Is this wise? is it possible?—We do not wish to answer, but only mention a solution that has been proposed. The chief purpose of the reform is to render French easier, and the reason why it ought to be made easier is, first of all, because it is a useful language for all sorts of people. There is now on foot a strong movement to introduce in the world an *international language*, which will by no means replace the other languages, but take in each country the place of foreign languages for practical purposes. Instead of learning French, German, Italian, Spanish, an English-speaking person, for instance, with only one tongue besides his own, will be able to get along in those four or more countries. Now, if a language like this was to make its way in this world, the reforms of spelling in the different languages would at once lose a great deal of importance; in other words, all the characteristic and historical features of the national tongues, which seem as many beauties to most of us, would at once be safe against so-called improvements, which hurt so much the feelings of all those attached to traditions. Then, only those would study other national languages than their own, who did it for the sake of higher culture. (The time taken on the modern languages considered as a mere tool for practical purposes, would at the same time allow us to render to the classical languages, Latin and Greek, their old place in our college courses—a place which otherwise is bound to become smaller and smaller.)

Of course, in America, where the movement for the introduction of the I. L. (International Language) has not found any echo as yet, this may seem rather an odd idea. But for those who have watched its progress in France, in Germany and in England for the last two or three years—both as a question of principle (see *Conturat*: "Rapport sur les progrès de l'idée de la langue internationale" au Congrès international de Philosophie, Genève, 1904) and as a practical solution of innumerable problems of our time (see all the dis-

cussions aroused in Europe after the Esperantist Congress in Boulogne, last September), things look very different. Ideas are gaining ground fast in our days, and the time may come sooner than many of us expect, when the attitude of men like Michel Bréal will be the proper attitude, namely: be conservative in questions of national languages (orthography, and others), but hasten the time of better understanding among people of all nations by the adoption of a world language.

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BEOWULF, 62, AGAIN.

It is perhaps rather late in the day to object to the conclusions of Professor Klaeber in his notes¹ on l. 62 of *Beowulf*, but I have only kept silent because I had other important things on hand. I think that Professor Klaeber, unintentionally, has somewhat misrepresented matters; and if I may be pardoned for adding a few more straws to the already heavy burden of this poor line, I should like to make the attempt to straighten some things out. It may be that one or two of my additions may have a more general interest than my title would seem to promise.

I hope that Professor Klaeber will not take offense if I suggest that he has been at times a trifle overconfident: perhaps in my first note² on this line I was, in the same way, a little at fault,—however, I think he has sinned more than I. The points at issue are: the facts concerning the erasure in this line, the meaning of them, and the part played by *hyrde ic* in Old English literature.

Professor Klaeber agrees with me that there is an erasure after *cwen*, but according to him we are not to draw any conclusions from it. "The scribe had made a mistake, which he corrected. (!) That is all the erasure tells us. Whether that unlucky scribal blunder which has caused so much headache to modern scholars,

¹ *Modern Language Notes*, xx, p. 11; *Modern Philology*, III, p. 243.

² *Modern Language Notes*, xix, 121.